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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of teaching English literature in an advanced English as a foreign language (EFL) course, and the importance of creating a literature syllabus that reflects the needs and the interests of the students. Classroom literature instruction has traditionally taught students to interpret literature as the teacher does, while student-centered teaching develops confidence in students, so they are able to read and discuss literature creatively and meaningfully. A student-centered approach requires students to learn technical terms, gather background information, and read the works before coming to class. The lessons on the literature are not designed as indoctrination or formal lecture, but as opportunities for sustained discussion and argument based in part on evaluative questions asked by the teacher. Students are also encouraged to express their own views and sensitivities during discussion sessions. (TR)

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TOWARDS A STUDENT-CENTRED TEACHING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Dr George Dandoulakis

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In this paper my intention is to consider to what extent Teacher-centred notions have affected English Literature courses, and to be more precise, the syllabus-making, the teaching and testing of English Literature. Secondly, to suggest how we can go towards a more student-centred teaching and testing. A secondary aim is to say which, in my view, is the place of English Literature within the framework of an English Language course at an advanced level. In other words, I am mainly concerned with foreign students of English Literature and the way it is taught in Greece, in particular. Perhaps some of my remarks are true in other countries where English Literature is part of an advanced English Studies Syllabus or a course in its own right.

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In Greece, English Literature has been taught at the British Council and some other Language Schools because it has been part of the Cambridge Proficiency and Diploma Examinations. Since 1975 the English Literature Paper for Proficiency, which was formerly compulsory, has become optional; so almost no student takes it any more. The Cambridge Diploma is still a purely literary examination as three of its Papers examine set books, and the fourth examines advanced reading comprehension and literary analysis of prose and poetry passages. But very few students attend the Diploma courses and take the exam. English literature is also taught at the English Departments of the Universities of Athens and Salonica, as part of the training of those students who intend to qualify as teachers of English.

My attitude is that the teaching of English Literature is an integral part of a language course at an advanced level. The reasons for it are simply that literature is one of the most authentic teaching materials; it is language at its best and it introduces us into the culture of a nation whose language our students are called to learn, practice and use effectively and accurately. I feel that through intensive and extensive study of literary works, an advanced student's skills in understanding, speaking and writing can reach high standards. It is, of course, sometimes very difficult for a foreigner to understand some aspects of another culture, but taking for granted that our

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students have a liking for literature, studies in literature will certainly enlarge their critical sense, their ability to talk and argue about literature, and their ability to write short essays, and perhaps some time later on, articles, reviews and books.

Some well-known Greek scholars have already expressed their views on the relationship between literature and EFL. The journal of our Assosiation (Cultural Association of Teachers of English in Greece) , Views on Language and & Language Teaching, has welcomed some interesting articles like "The Teaching of Literature and the Teaching of Language" by Professor Raizis, whose main assumption is that"language, literature and culture are by their nature and definition interrelated, overlapping and interdependent concepts and phenomena"$_1$; that literary "texts should be carefully selected so as to be commensurate with the students´ proficiency level; that literature has a pedagogic value and the power to help students to understand human nature better, and that it must be taught by specialists in the field. Two more articles, "Literature and EFL" by Mr Luke Prodromou and "'Literature' and Extensive Reading in EFL" by Dr Papaefthymiou-Lytra are also worth mentioning. The former article argues that the main problem so far is the failure to integrate the teaching of literature with the teaching of language; also that we should "aim to stretch and refine their (the students') sense of the way language and context are interrelated. The presentation of the literary text would, in other words, be both a language exercise and an exercise in practical criticism"$_2$. Mr Prodromou outlines his approach by picking up two prose passages and a poetic one, and then asking questions on the context and the lexical, grammatical and stylistic peculiarities in them. He feels that this is a good way of developing the students´ reading comprehension, oral and written skills, and that this approach might form the basis of an ESP for Literature. In the latter article, Dr Lytra, speaking as an Applied Linguist and not as a literary critic, makes clear that "it is not the literary merits that will determine the inclusion of a specific text in an extensive reading list in an EFL programme" and recommends "literature"$_3$,both in its broad sense (any written source which may exemplify the foreign language in use) and in its narrow one (fiction,drama,poetry) as a means of developing the student´s sensitivity in handling the foreign language accurately and appropriately. Morover, to cope

with the problem of "culture", which might frustrate both some teachers and students, she recommends both literary and non-literary works about Greece, written by native speakers of English.

Both approaches to the problem of integrating the teaching of language to the teaching of literature are undoubtedly very usuful and can be exploited with most satisfactory results. EFL textbooks can and must make very profitable use of literary passages but I do not see why these passages should not be chosen among the best of literature.Secondly, I feel that if a student can profitably read books on Greece, written originally in English, he can also read literature dealing with England or America, despite cultural differences. The "unknown", in this case "culture", may be the cause of frustration, but very often is a source of excitement and can serve as motivation. Both approaches have a place within the framework of an advanced syllabus of English Studies, but my attitude is that within the same framework literature must still be taught as literature, because literature is not only interrelated to language and language teaching but also to Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Politics, and Biography. Only, we should try to make the teaching of it more student-centred, because at present I do not believe it is.

In Greece and perhaps in other countries overseas, the teaching of English literature has tended to be far more teacher-centred. I just remeber an American visiting professor in 1971 when I was an undergraguate. One of the novels of the syllabus was Henry James' The Turn of the Screw. We had a very hot argument because I refused to accept that Edmund Wilson's hallucination theory was the only possible interpretation of the novel. I also remeber another incident. In 1972 I was attending the Cambridge Diploma course at the British Council. I was given an "A" for an essay on Jane Eyre and Villette which discussed the teacher's views of these two novels, but I was asked to re-write an essay on The Merchant of Venice, which argued that Shylock was a man "more sinned against than sinning". When I had re-written the essay and argued that Shylock was no more than a malicious being, a comic figure that deserved his punishment, I was given a good mark. I can understand that every man has his own prejudices about literature, but the question is whether the teacher should impart his views to the students, if yes to what extent, and whether he

should enforce them or not. But before trying to answer such questions, we should take into account that in Greece teacher-centred teaching has always had a place apart. Learning is still a matter of memorising the textbook; research is not encouraged to the extent it should, and when it is, there are not sufficient library facilities; teaching is still authoritarian as teachers and professors still appear to be infallible gods; they often prescribe and teach out of their own books at the expense of other relevant bibliography; they examine their own students by setting questions based on their lectures and mark the examination papers themselves. The employment of external examiners, which we see in England, is unthinkable. The practice of providing the students with guidance notes on the syllabus and further lists of bibliography at the beginning of each academic year is very rare or non-existent. Of course, there are some brilliant exceptions, but they are rather few, I am afraid.

In my view, teacher-centred teaching starts from the principle that the syllabus has to be taught, studied, and learnt; while student-centred teaching starts from the principle that the syllabus has to be read and enjoyed first; understanding, discussion and argument come afterwards. It is a principle that some English Departments in England have already adopted and it is a largely held view that the student-centredness of teaching, and particularly the teaching of English Literature should start at a very early age, long before students go to universities. This came as a reaction to the teacher-centred notion of English Literature which dates from the second half of the 19th century. Since then English universities, professors, lecturers and critics, have attempted to establish English Literature, form a canon of accepted writers and poets, dismiss or underrate others, and dictate how readers should view and evaluate writers and their works. This was the "enterprise of discovering and affirming Englishness"[4], which Professor Lucas very vividly illustrates in his article "The Birth of English Lit". The following quotation from his brilliant article traces the origin of the teacher-centred notion of English Literature :

> Professors of English Literature in the modern universities therefore become "ambassadors" or "missionaries" sent out into every important capital of industrialism in the country. They have an obligation not merely to their students but still more towards the teeming population outside the university walls...Hence the extension lecture, adult education ,

the introduction at home and abroad of examination syllabuses in English in schools, colleges and universities.

The teacher-centred notion has above all affected the making of syllabuses. I doubt if the students have ever been asked which writers they would like to study before the syllabus came out, the only exception perhaps in post-graduate studies. This is mainly because it is customary in all countries to teach the literature of the establishment, as there is always some kind of direct or indirect State intervention which varies from country to country. Everybody knows that literature can introduce cultural, philosophical, economic, and political ideas other than those of the State. Writers often choose to challenge what the State has accepted as orthodoxy, while the State may choose to dismiss or underrate them because they provide a stay for political and cultural anarchy.

To make up for the fact that students have no say in the making, English Literature syllabuses usually give students the chance to choose among a variety of courses on the different periods of literature, courses on Special Authors, or courses dealing with more general themes such as the Development of different literary genres, the Novel, the Theatre etc. And although some English Literature Syllabuses are more rigid, while others are more flexible, being able to choose is certainly an aspect of the syllabus-making that has taken the students into account.

Now I come to the teaching of literature in class. If I pick up a poem, read it to my students and tell them : Now look! this is what it is all about. The poet is telling us this and this, and this is the way he does it, I have not done anything more than showing the students my own ability to read and understand poetry. In a few months' time I will have trained my students to look at literature the way I look at it, and most probably they will be ready to discuss literature putting forward my point of view. This may give me a sense of satisfaction, particularly if I have to examine them myself. But is this kind of teaching student-centred? Have I trained them to read creatively and bring meaning into operation. I'm afraid not, or very little. And who am I to tell the students how they should look at writers and their works ? Of course, I am

the teacher and I am supposed to know more. But what about them? I feel that as a teacher of literature my primary task is to make my students like literature more and more. Students should be made to feel that they can read and discuss literature creatively; they are ready to support their own views and argue against other people´s views. Through student-centred teaching,students become self-confident, while through teacher-centred teaching they are not given the opportunity to think about literature; they are given pieces of criticism,and are trained to depend upon the the teacher´s authority. This may bring students to the point of hating literature.

Of course, when students are first initiated into the world of literature in class, some technical terms like : metre,rhyme,rhythm, imagery,diction, subject-matter, plot,theme, character, point of view, etc., have to be explained. But when we come to the study of set books, the students must be given the chance to realize what they can do themselves, before they are told what the particular piece of literature is about or what other interpretations of of it exist.

We should also be careful with Background, which, I think, is no more than an account attempting to relate the literary work to the historic and social events of the period it was written. But above all it is a way through which we indoctrinate our students with the establishment´s political, philosophical, and social views, or our own, since our views of history, politics and society often depend upon what we are. So by giving background to students we are actually telling them how they should look at society and literature.

Another suggestion is that students must have read the set books

before they come to class. Then a discussion course will follow and not a series of formal lectures. Through tutorials students can be given the best opportunity for sustained argument and discussion. In case, however, a poem has to be first introduced in class, the students should be asked to read it silently to get an idea about it, and then the teacher could ask questions like : WHAT IS THE POET´S PURPOSE? - expecting to elicit the theme, then HOW DOES THE POET TRY TO EXPRESS HIS THEME? - expecting to elicit answers about the kind of poem it is, and how the poet produces his effects by his choice of diction, imagery, and his use of rhyme or rhythm. Then the teacher can ask a number of evaluation questions like :

HAS THE POET SUCCEEDED IN WHAT HE SET OUT TO DO?

DOES THE POEM ADD TO OUR EXPERIENCE?

HAS IT MADE US FEEL MORE DEEPLY?

IS IT WORTH KNOWING WELL OR SHALL WE BE CONTENT TO FORGET IT?

By thinking over and then trying to answer such questions, the students are trained to use their own skills and talents. They do not just receive information about literature passively.

Finally I have a few words about testing. I´ve noticed that the questions set by the various examining boards very often expect to elicit a predetermined answer or presuppose that the student has read certain critics. What I am suggesting is that examination questions should first of all be free from previous lectures on the subject. The lectures may have given some hints and clues but not the answers. In other words, questions should be less restricting and more open to encourage a variety of responses or different approaches. Questions should allow the students to express their own views and sensitivities.

NOTES

1. Raizis B., The Teaching of Literature and the Teaching of Language, Views on Language and Language Teaching, Vol.VI, No. 2, October 1980.

2. Prodromou L.,Literature and EFL, Views on Language and Language Teaching, Vol.VII, No.2, September-November 1981.

3. Papaefthymioy-Lytra S., 'Literature' and Extensive Reading in EFL, 'Views on Language and Language Teaching, Vol.VIII, No.2, September-November 1983.

4. Lucas J., The Birth of English Lit.,Moderns and Contemporaries, London 1985.